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ABSTRACT

This paper combines information from two published articles with an account of preparation for a wilderness expedition that included hearing-impaired people. Whether outdoor programs are planned for adventure, recreation, or educational purposes, they are increasingly being made more accessible for handicapped people. The paper focuses on problems related to programming outdoor activities for the hearing impaired and offers suggestions to minimize these problems. Planning for a 10-day canoe trip on the Current River in Missouri with a "mixed ability" group from St. Paul, Minnesota, is described. The trip was part of a practicum for college students learning how to work for outdoor programs offering opportunities for disabled people. Preparation for the trip included addressing concerns for communication skills, safety, and education. This paper calls for increasing involvement by people with disabilities in the planning and implementation of outdoor activities. (TES)

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Closing The Communication Gap

Steps Toward Quality Wilderness Programming With People Who Have Hearing Impairments

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This paper is a composite of a series of events I experienced while preparing for, and later carrying out, an expedition that included people with hearing impairments, and two published articles addressing the topic of outdoor programming with people who are hearing impaired. The reason for this paper is in response to the ever increasing accessibility of wilderness programming to people with disabilities. "During the past 20 years, there has been a relative explosion of interest in making the world accessible to disabled or exceptional individuals." (Quinsland, Pomeray & Van Ginkel, 1986.)

Outdoor adventure or wilderness programming, as described by Daltilo and Murphy (1987) is "a subjective challenge experience that often includes elements of actual or perceived danger." While challenge and risk are the most publicized aspects of outdoor programming today, such experiences can also simply be for recreation and environmental awareness.

Today, outdoor programs have taken tremendous steps towards not only making their programs more accessible, but have also implemented changes to help meet special needs in order to provide a productive and positive experience for all who choose to participate. Wilderness Inquiry, a wilderness program based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, offers

backcountry trips for mixed ability groups to locations throughout the entire country, from Alaska to Florida. While adaptive equipment plays a role in accessibility and participation, more importantly, attitudinal and methodology changes make this program successful. Focusing on people's abilities versus their disabilities, and an emphasis on accomplishing goals versus accomplishing them in "normal" fashions, are some of the program's inner strengths.

However, in other program areas, according to Quinsland et al. (1986), "the experiences of deaf participants have been for the most part mediocre, while some experiences have been honestly disastrous for everyone involved."

This paper will focus on the problems related to programming with people who have hearing impairments and will offer some suggestions to minimize these issues. The answers provided are simply from my own experiences and limited research. In no way are they conclusive or presented as rules of thumb. We can only hope that the following thoughts will at least make the reader aware of what questions to ask before embarking on such an experience.

Before getting started, it is important to describe my particular circumstances regarding the trip with people who were hearing impaired. Our expedition was created as a part of a semester long outdoor education practicum (see

appendix) for college students which would prepare them to work for outdoor programs offering opportunities for people with disabilities. The final component of the course is to plan and carry out a ten day trip with a mixed ability group.

In April of 1988 we took a group of four people, from a transitional residential program in St. Paul, Minnesota, who had hearing impairments, to the Current River in Missouri. Our group consisted of the four participants and a staff person from their program, five hearing college students, an interpreter, and myself. We met as a group twice before the expedition, once in an introductory meeting, and once for a weekend session to prepare for the trip. The college students also received an elementary introduction to sign language.

The first question that needs to be answered when preparing for an expedition is "why are we going?" Without answering this question, there is no sense of direction for the planning.

Many programs today focus on personal growth development, often through challenge type programming involving various uses of stress. This methodology requires not only a lot of trust and high quality leadership, but also a high level of communication ability between all members of the group. According to Luckner (1988), working through an interpreter makes it "very difficult for an

instructor to get to know students and provides limited opportunities for discussing anything other than surface level topics."

While the personal growth through challenge concept is worthwhile, we felt that, because of our communication gap, we would select another emphasis. Thus our basic goal was to simply attempt to provide a fun, recreational and educational trip for the participants.

Luckner (1988) also states that it is strongly recommended that instructional staff possess excellent simultaneous communication skills, such as the ability to speak while using signs. If programs do not have qualified staff for such an undertaking, several options are available, including the following: bring in an outdoor adventure educator with the necessary skills to instruct the course and to train staff; do not conduct the course; or work with a sign language interpreter.

We chose to work with an interpreter, but realized it was not an equitable substitute for skilled instructors. As a result, we needed to recognize the weaknesses and attempt to minimize them. Problem areas included the already mentioned goals for the trip, safety issues, and educational techniques.

On any trip, safety is the overriding issue above all others. If a person is injured or killed, the trip, and

often the program itself, will end. Every effort possible should be made ahead of time to recognize possible hazards and to strive to minimize them.

Our ability to get the attention of the participants and for them to get ours was very important. We felt comfortable with our pairing off or buddy system, which put one hearing and one hearing impaired person in each boat. While this never gave the opportunity for two hearing impaired people to paddle together, we felt in out situation that this was a safety measure we would have to adhere to.

We also offered very detailed precaution demonstrations and discussions. In our presentation about water hazards we would often in mime act out the right ways, and, especially, the wrong ways to do things. Then, as a review, we would explain the topic through the interpreter while making certain that everyone understood.

In regard to rapid attention getting procedures, it has been recommended by Quinsland et al. (1986) to use safety whistles, but to be sure to instruct people in their use. If a deaf person holds his/her finger over the hole, he/she may be unaware of the lack of noise being made. Luckner (1988) suggests the use of white flags to indicate "stop what you are doing and attend to the leaders." Obviously, any safety communication system should be explained and tested.

Another aspect that helped minimize our safety concerns was the fact that our interpreter had a background in outdoor programming herself. This increased her effectiveness tremendously when conveying ideas and precautionary tactics.

One aspect of any outdoor trip is the fact that it usually takes place in an environment that is fairly new to everyone. Constructing one's life in regards to daily needs and comforts outside of four walls and a roof requires new learning. Our goal was to provide as much instruction as possible so that the participants could not only be comfortable in this outdoor setting, but could also become actively involved with the camping components of the trip.

Our first step was to focus on what may be new terminology, since "introduction of key terms, equipment, techniques or maneuvers, prior to participation in situations is critical." (Luckner, 1988) If signs do not exist, or are not known, new signs should be created and understood by all.

In our situation we not only wanted to teach the participants new skills, but we also wanted to limit our communication through our interpreter. While we felt that this required a tremendous amount of patience and energy on everyone's part, we thought it necessary to minimize our weakness by making learning a group project that we would all have to participate in. Our first opportunities to communicate were frustrating, but we slowly began to increase our communication, and to draw closer to each other

through our shared attempts.

We found that by working one on one with the participants on a particular skill, such as fire building, stove operation, or setting up tents, and then allowing them to teach the rest of the participants, we were successful in our communication. This method helped with us with our communication skills, and provided the participants with an active and responsible role.

In general, most of our teaching was from an experiential type format. The participants were learning by doing, and so were we. Mimes, posters, and demonstrations all provided us with tools to teach.

One of our most successful methods was the designing of model rivers in sandbars, Curves in the river, shallow beds, downed trees, and other dynamics of the river could be clearly shown while pouring water through the model. After comprehension of the river was achieved, the next step was to point out the same features on the real thing.

When planning programs for people with disabilities, it is important to consider exactly what it would be like in an outdoor setting by such individuals. In other words, what additional complications might there be with all these new environmental variables?

The best source possible to help answer this question would be a deaf person who has a solid understanding of outdoor programming. In our situation we did not have such a valuable resource, so we had to rely on the participants,

the staff people working with the participants, and as much foresight as possible.

The aspect of darkness is one dimension of a trip that a hearing person could easily forget to consider. Since "darkness may have a debilitating affect on hearing impaired individuals, it is essential to have multiple sources of light." (Luckner, 1988) This goes beyond having an adequate amount of flashlights, spare bulbs, and extra batteries. If evening discussions are planned, two, possibly even three lanterns should be utilized. Placement and use of the lanterns also requires attention in order to keep shadows from blocking people's ability to communicate.

In summary, quality programming requires a lot more than just adaptive equipment. This paper touches on a small fraction of the issues concerning outdoor programming with people who have hearing impairments. As the activities change, so do the rules and need for understanding. Backpacking, sailing, and rock climbing are other activities presently being utilized. Winter camping, with the need to keep hands fully covered with mittens or gloves, adds an interesting new challenge.

As the growth of programming continues, it becomes more important to include people with disabilities in the lanning and implementation of activities. It is my hope that papers like this one will serve as a call to action for this kind of support. Many programs strive to provide

integrating opportunities at the participant level. The time has come for that same integration to occur at the instructional and administration level too.

References

Dattilo, John & Murphy, William (1987). Facilitating the Challenge in Adventure Recreation for Persons With Disabilities, 21(3), 14-22.

Luckner, J.L. (1988). Outdoor Adventure and the Hearing Impaired...Considerations for Program Development. PALAESTRA: The Forum of Sport, Physical Education and Recreation for the Disabled , 40-43.

Quinsland, L., Pomeray, B. & Van Ginkel, A. (1986). "Sorry...I Can't Hear You" - Wilderness Programming With Deaf People. Journal of Experiential Education, 1(1), 9-12.

WINTER BLOCK COURSE COMPONENTS

1. O. E. Practicum - 4 credits

   Area of Focus: Outdoor skills, including cross country skiing, winter camping, snowshoeing, dog sledging, winter ecology, trip planning/preparation, canoeing, canoe camping.
   Time: 2 weeks

   Area of Focus: Canoe expedition to the Current River in Missouri with a group of hearing impaired people. Prepare a proposal documenting expedition plans, preparation of selves as leaders for the expedition and hearing impaired people as participants.
   Time: 4 weeks

2. Teaching Techniques - 4 credits

   Area of Focus: Development of teaching style and methods, experiential teaching opportunities in the Sandstone Public Schools and during the expedition.
   Time: 3 weeks

3. Mixed Ability Groups - 4 credits

   Area of Focus: Workshops on hearing impaired people, expedition with hearing impaired people, mini-internship at an outdoor education/mixed ability group program, workshop on disability awareness, and Sandstone Public School mixed ability groups.
   Time: 7 weeks

4. Group Dynamics Practicum - 2 credits (Pass/Fail)

   The focus for this component will be a real life opportunity to recognize your personal characteristics as an individual and as a group member, and how those characteristics relate to working in the outdoor education field.

   Areas of Focus:

   -giving/receiving constructive feedback
   -ability to feel acceptance within a group and
     to make others feel accepted
   -ability to create and feel a sense of trust in a group
   -ability to confront others constructively
   -flexibility, creativity, motivation

   Group Dynamics Practicum in this approach will be more of a self-inventory regarding the factors listed above. You will not be graded on these factors, but you will receive a personal assessment from each of the group members. An experience such as Winter Block provides a valuable opportunity to "know thyself," which is a crucial first step before Group Dynamics becomes a skill. Our task is to create an environment and atmosphere in which such growth can occur.